

PROSPECT; or, *View of the Moral World.*

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Comments upon the Sacred Writings of the Jews and Christians. Exodus Chapter 23.

IN the third verse of this chapter we have a specimen of the ideas which the chosen people of God entertained of the principles of justice; but it is *holy writ*, and therefore, whether right or wrong, must be swallowed down under pain of everlasting damnation. The phrase and the principle to which we allude is this—"Thou shalt not countenance a poor man in his cause." The high-toned hypocritical atheistical advocate for christianity, the celebrated Bishop of Landaff, whose arrows fall pointless from the invulnerable Paine, this great champion of blood and superstition has advanced the abominable sentiment that God has made in this world both rich and poor;—a sentiment that dishonors God and tends to corrupt and demoralize the heart of man. When man abandons the plain grounds of fact, the visible phenomena of nature, and entangles himself in the labyrinth of incognisable causes and principles, he becomes a superstitious idiot and his writings are calculated only to injure the science and virtue of the world. Take away all the poverty produced by kings and priests; take away all that which results from human indolence, profligacy and extravagance; take away that which is the effect of unavoidable misfortune, and it would be fair to presume that there would be very little balance left to charge to the account of God. But Bishop Watson wished to make God the author of poverty, and then there would be more reason *for not countenancing a poor man in his cause*; for if God has shewn his displeasure in making some men poor, it will surely be right for man to join with God and shew his displeasure against those on whom *divine* power has impressed the terrible mark of poverty. Eternal justice, however, holds the balance even, and administers to all mankind, whether rich or poor, with an e-

qual hand. Justice shews no distinction; but the sympathetic and benevolent properties of human nature are often invited to bestow upon the poor and unfortunate what the rich neither need nor ought to possess. If then we take this passage of *holy writ* contained in the third verse of this chapter, and bring it before the bar of truth and justice, we shall find it essentially defective in point of moral principle. According to this doctrine, a man already poor and unfortunate is to be made more so by the tyrannical persecutions of society; he is not to be countenanced in his cause; he is not to obtain even common justice—the courts of law are to set their faces against him, and for no other reason in the world only because he is poor and stands in greater need of justice and humanity than those whose conditions in life are more affluent and fortunate. Society ought to be just to all—to the poor and miserable, not rendered so by their own vicious actions, it ought to be sympathetic, humane and beneficent. If this be *holy writ*, which contains such injustice, then save us hereafter from all kinds of *holy writs*, and give us legal writs or any kind of writs except those of *holy writs*.

Religion in its most common acceptation is a complex idea compounded of three things totally distinct from each other, the first I shall mention is the observance of certain rites and ceremonies, such as circumcision—baptism—fasting on particular days—feasting on others—abstaining from pleasures, and many other external symbols which has, by some, been considered as the sum total of religion. 2dly, There is included in the idea of religion, an assent to certain metaphysical propositions, such as the nature and properties of the supreme intelligence, the extent of his interference in the affairs of this world, and the nature and essence of the human soul. 3dly, The word religion has also included in it an approbation of some systems of morality, supposed to be deduced as a necessary inference from the articles of be-

lief. Hence it has been said, morality itself, or the knowledge and practice of duties alone, is not religion, without it be accompanied with the observance of certain rites, and the belief in a metaphysical creed. Neither is the observance of the established ceremonies to be considered as acts of religion, unless the prescribed duties be also fulfilled; but above all things the mind must give its assent to the metaphysical creed. Finally, this metaphysical creed, which in every case is so essentially necessary, is not of itself religion. Ceremonies must be observed, and that kind of morality, deduceable from an absurd creed, must be adhered to, as far as the weakness of our supposed fallen nature will allow.

Nothing could have supported extravagant rites and ceremonies, or chained men's minds down to absurd creeds if these had not been artfully interwoven with a plausible system of morality; nor would men have submitted to call that good which is in its nature evil, or that evil, which is naturally good, if the mind had not been prepossessed with a false creed.

It is, therefore my intention to enquire how this association of three ideas totally distinct came to take place and assume the name of religion—what connection they have in nature—whether they may not be separated without injury to morality; and, finally, having thus stript morality of the load with which it has been incumbered, we shall then see what ought to be the idea or definition of true religion.

As it would take up too much time to examine the whole of these propositions, we shall content ourselves with an investigation of the probable origin of rites, ceremonies, and creeds. In all ages mankind have believed in the existence of celestial beings, who have been supposed to direct the affairs of this lower world, and have been anxious to know their will, and as far back as the history of man has been preserved, the practice was to have recourse to oracles; and frequently, it is said, anticipating the wishes of man, communicated their will in dreams or visions: but as oracles and dreams were al-

ways ambiguous a class of men sprung up, who, taking advantage of the passions of the ignorant, pretended to a superior skill in the interpretation of these imaginary enigmas: This was found to be so profitable an employment, that its professors, desirous of converting it into a trade, wherein many hands might be employed, under the direction, and for the emolument of one chief; taught their pupils that certain appearances in nature, denoted certain purposes of the Gods; hence the management of the Urim and Thummim among the Jews, which answers to the purpose of reading cards or cups, by old women of the present day: of the same kind also, were predictions from the appearance of the entrails of sacrificed animals, and the manner of the flight of birds. This was the origin of the priesthood and of priestcraft. Afterwards the followers of the craft, while they were deceiving the world by lyes, were themselves deceived, believing, as they did, implicitly in the correspondencies taught or transmitted to them from the first deceivers.

As the whole invention of converting lying into a trade was only that its followers might live in splendid idleness; and as money was not then a representative for wealth, sacrifices and offerings were invented: the first to satisfy the hunger of the priests, the second to procure them the gratification of their passions: And as in those days the people were accustomed to barter, and to give one substantial object for another, it was necessary to give them some plausible reason that might satisfy the minds of the people, as to the strange absurdity and injustice of taking a bullock, or a ram of the best of their flocks for that which cost nothing, they were therefore told, that these sacrifices and offerings were pleasing and acceptable to the Gods, and that for these small donations, or rather bribes, the heavenly powers would be propitious, and change their absolute decrees.

This period of deception may be called the age of oracles, and it lasted as long as the priests were moderate in their demands; while they preserved some shew

of decency in their manners, and while the characters and actions of their Gods were such as indicate a divine origin : But when the priests became too rapacious and greedy, and when their morals and the morals ascribed to their gods grew to be so dissolute and abandoned that they had more the appearance of demons and tyrants than of gods and men desirous of the happiness of the human race, then this superstition, after combating with reason for several centuries, was obliged to give place to another equally absurd and wicked, but which in its commencement gained the approbation of the people by the purity of the lives of the first promulgators : this is the doctrine of discovering the will of Gods from books or scripture. Oracles or dreams were then said to be abandoned as improper means of communicating the will of Gods to men.

Demons, it is said, had taken advantage of those means and had egregiously deceived the people, in so much that the will of Demons or evil spirits were generally substituted for that of the true God. A doctrine which gained an easy belief from the people of those times, as the will of the gods expressed by the oracles, tended more frequently to the destruction than preservation of mankind. It was said, also, that to prevent the interference of devils or false (lying) gods, the only true god had written or caused to be written in some ancient manuscript books, some of them in the language of Paradise which was almost forgotten, and hardly understood, and others in the prevailing language of that time, which was the Greek ; that they ordered these books to be collected and preserved for the instruction of men in all ages and in every nation ; and he promises, that this shall be his unalterable will and last testament ; that he will no longer confuse or perplex the people of the earth with new regulations and laws ; and finally, that he would to the end of time, continue a succession of priests whose trade it should be to interpret those books, and reconcile their contradictions, for which they are to receive money, and thereby put an end to sacrifices.

To be continued.

POPE'S POETIC CLIMAX
OF
Universal Sympathy,
*Carried on to its Acme, in the four last lines, by J.
Stewart.*

Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to 'wake,
As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake ;
The centre moves, a circle straight succeeds,
Another still, and still, another spreads,
Friend, parent, neighbour first it will embrace,
His country next, and next all human race,
Wide and more wide the o'erflowings of the mind,
Take every creature in, of every kind.
Drove on by sympathy and reasons strife,
Breaks upon the shores of all existent life,
Sinks in the soil of matter to repose,
And self and nature's endless union shews.

Profession of Faith from Rousseau, continued.

It may prove as seductive, however, as it will, it can no longer deceive me. I know it for what it is, and, even while I am misled by it, despise it. So far from esteeming it an object of happiness, I see it is an obstacle to it. Hence, I long for that moment when I shall shake off this incumbrance of body, and be myself, without inconsistency or participation with matter, and shall depend on myself only to be happy. In the mean time, I make myself happy in this life ; because I hold the evils of life as trifling in themselves, as almost foreign to my being ; and conceive, at the same time, that all the real good which may thence be deduced depends on myself.

To anticipate as much as possible that desirable state of happiness, power, and liberty, I exercise my mind in sublime contemplations. I meditate on the order of the universe; not indeed with a view to explain it by vain systems, but to admire it perpetually, and to adore its all-wise Creator, whose features I trace in his workmanship. With him I am thus enabled to converse, and to exert my faculties in the contemplation of his divine essence; I am affected by his beneficence, I praise him for his mercies, but never so far forget myself as to pray. For what should I ask of him? That he should, for my sake, pervert the order of things, and work miracles in my favour? Shall I, who ought to love and admire, above all things, that order which is established by his wisdom, and maintained by his providence, desire that such order should be broken for me? No, such a rash petition would rather merit punishment than acceptance. Nor can I pray to him for the power of acting aright for why should I petition for what he hath already given me? Has he not given me conscience to love virtue, reason to know what it is, and liberty to make it my choice? If I do evil I have no excuse, I do it because I will; to desire him to change my will, is to require that of him which he requires of me: this would be to desire him to do my work, while I receive the reward. Not to be content with my situation in the order of things, is to desire to be no longer a man; it is to wish things were otherwise constituted than they are; to wish for evil and disorder.

No, thou source of justice and truth! God, merciful and just! placing my confidence in thee, the chief desire of my heart is, that thy will be done. By rendering my will conformable to thine, I act as thou dost, I acquiesce in thy goodness, and conceive myself already a partaker of that supreme felicity which is its reward.

The only thing which, under a just diffidence of myself, I request of him, or rather expect from his justice, is, that he will correct my errors when I go astray. To be sincere, however, I do not think my judgement infallible: such of my opinions, as seem to be the best found-

ed, may nevertheless be false ; for what man hath not his opinions ? and how few are there who agree in every thing ? It is to no purpose that the illusions by which I am mislead arise from myself ; it is he alone can dissipate them. I have done every thing in my power to arrive at truth ; but its source is elevated beyond my reach. If my faculties fail me, in what am I culpable ? It is necessary for truth to stoop to my capacity."

The good priest spoke with some earnestness : he was moved, and I was also greatly affected. I imagined myself attending to the divine Orpheus, singing his hymns, and teaching mankind the worship of the Gods. A number of objections, however, to what he had said, suggested themselves ; though I did not urge one, because they were less solid than perplexing ; and though not convinced, I was nevertheless persuaded he was not in the right. In proportion as he spoke to me from the conviction of his own conscience, mine confirmed me in the truth of what he said.

The sentiments you have been delivering, said I to him, appear newer to me in what you profess yourself ignorant of, than in what you profess to believe. I see in the latter nearly that theism, or natural religion, which Christians affect to confound with atheism and impiety, though in fact diametrically opposite. In the present situation of my mind, I find it difficult to adopt precisely your opinion, and to be as wise as you. To be, at least, as sincere, however, I will consult my own conscience on these points. It is not that internal sentiment which, according to your example, ought to be my conductor ; and you have yourself taught me, that, after having imposed silence on it for a long time, it is not to be awakened again in a moment.

To be continued.

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